

Big Cypress National Preserve  
ORV Research Needs Status - August 17, 2010

The 2000 Final Recreational Off-Road Vehicle Management Plan identified 31 projects relative to improving the information base for implementation of the Plan and to support ORV management within the Preserve. The approach was to gain additional information as proposed actions were implemented, and obtain additional information through monitoring, experience, and research. As the knowledge base expanded, the National Park Service would respond by adapting management actions that assured the highest protection of the Preserve's resources. Research would be focused on the outstanding questions related to managing ORV use. A summary of those identified actions was produced in Table 3 of the Plan (page 60). The priority given each project at the time was either High, Medium, or Low. The Table has been reproduced as an accompaniment to this document, with the projects sorted in a suggested numerical priority order based upon needs identified prior to establishment of the current ORV Advisory Committee. This order is subject to revision and recommendations based on input from the Committee and public comment.

Since the production of the ORV Plan, it is worth considering whether all the projects identified in 2000 may have the same relevance or priority that they once did. For instance, the UGA data ground-truthing project (#31) that was considered a high priority in 2000, could be considered a very low priority, if it is any longer needed at all. This is because the project was designed to verify the level of trail intensity per section that was suspect at the time of the approval of the Plan's Record of Decision. The UGA work was done using aerial photography taken in 1994 and 1995. Verification of aerial photo interpretation from photographs taken over fifteen years ago, with the technology available at the time, may not be worth spending money on, particularly since the information gained won't assist in making decisions about where to place designated trails.

Regarding trail stabilization techniques (#13), regarded as a high priority in 2000, we have gained knowledge through experience and experimentation that may question the need to conduct a research project to answer questions about how best to stabilize trails. We have also conducted field tests on Concho Billie, Oasis, and Monument Trails that point to successful treatment techniques that may modify the level of research needed, or how the research would be conducted. Topographic mapping (#15) was listed as a high priority in 2000 and although not conducted as a result of the ORV Plan, some work has been done via CERP efforts to characterize BICY topography.

Management Unit carrying capacity (#1) has not been conducted yet, but what has begun is a project in cooperation with the University of Florida to conduct historical data analysis related to ORV use and panthers, looking at 25 years of hunting, ORV use, panther telemetry, and backcountry use data in order to provide baseline information for a more comprehensive examination of ORV use and its impacts on panthers and other natural resources. Completion of this project will tell us what type of research project is still necessary to determine carrying capacity, or if that determination can be made immediately.

An inventory of reptiles and amphibians (#24) has been done. A small mammal inventory (#22), as well as a natural soundscape determination (#20), are scheduled for completion this year. A fish inventory (#25) has been done. Not included as a research project in 2000, a vascular plant inventory has been done and would be the first logical step in determining the effects of ORV use on vegetative communities (#9). Although an original research project has not been conducted regarding surface flow (#4), water quality impacts (#11), or wildlife effects (#10), the Preserve has established 20 permanent water quality and water stage monitoring stations that do alert Preserve staff to changing conditions resulting from not only ORV use but other land uses as well, and monitoring of T&E wildlife species has been constant since before the ORV planning process began.

It is important here to acknowledge the National Park Service Inventory and Monitoring Program, through the South Florida and Caribbean Network, for their efforts to conduct the inventories listed above, independent of research funding.

The 2000 ORV Plan summarizes those studies that would be useful in supporting management of ORVs in Big Cypress National Preserve. The Plan goes on to discuss prioritizing the projects relative to budgeting and staffing constraints, and that funding for research projects would be sought through several sources, including the National Park Service Natural Resources Protection Program (NRPP), the Cultural Resources Protection Program (CRPP), the Operating Financial System (OFS), and the Critical Ecosystems Study Initiative (CESI), among others. The Plan suggests cooperative research programs with universities would be considered, and congressional line-item funding also would be sought for construction, maintenance, and restoration. The Plan goes on to say the National Park Service would continue to pursue funding for research relating to ORV use.

It is important to consider how the National Park Service achieves research. The NPS is not a research agency and for the most part relies on outside entities to conduct its research, usually in association with universities, cooperators, or research agencies such as the U.S. Geological Survey. Big Cypress National Preserve has no research budget. All funds necessary to conduct research or inventory projects within the Preserve come from outside sources. Typically, those funds are acquired through competition with other national park units.

Annually, the Preserve has an opportunity to compete for research funds through a process known as the Service-wide Combined Call. The "call" is a request for proposals that is generated by our Washington headquarters through our regional office in Atlanta. Guidelines are provided for each NPS unit within our region (Southeast Region), declaring funding categories, some of which are listed on Table 3. Certain types of projects are only eligible for certain categories of funding - water projects from the Water Resources Division, listed species from the Threatened and Endangered Species category, restoration from the Disturbed Lands category, for instance. When the guidelines are formulated each year, our Washington and Atlanta offices provide how many projects will be funded from each funding category. As might be suspected, there are far more projects identified each year than there is funding available. The result is guidance that allows a restricted number of projects from each funding category, or a maximum dollar amount for each project, or both, usually both. The result is that, most of the 73 park units within the region compete for the same funding sources, while the guidance may indicate that only 2 or 3 projects will be funded from a source.

The record for Big Cypress is probably typical for each park unit service-wide, every so often, we successfully compete for research funds. In addition, every once in a while, an alternative funding source provides opportunities. This results in what is occurring currently relative to research progress for the Preserve. Out of the 31 identified projects, some level of activity, from just beginning the process, to completion, has occurred on about one-third of the projects identified in Table 3. The rest remain in line for competition.